Toward a principle of contemporary urbanity: Housing Ensembles and connective open spaces from product to resource

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If a principle of urbanity is clearly visible within the consolidated city, establishing a specific relationship between open space and urban fabric, where the first element is the connection and the configuration of the second through the streets, squares, etc., which were the places, with a collective character, recognizable and shareable, where the most important social relations took place. On the contrary today, the landscape of the sprawl city no longer exits as those connection rules are not adequate in the definition of a principle of urban settlement. Such device is weak and marginal, and is the result of an accumulation and a fragmentation process.

The loss value of the open space becomes apparent, not only in the building of large territorial figures, but especially in the definition of minor figures which should compose the connection system of the urban fabric, as a result of a different principle of urbanity.

The definition of strategies, which should reflect a new way of living the territory and the city, becomes a crucial issue to consider, when speaking of urban design, both with respect to what already exists and to the future housing developments.

On one hand, it becomes crucial to protect the residual agricultural spaces through the recovery of large figures on a regional scale, as a defense bulwark against the building expansion, on the other hand it is necessary to make up new ways to reassemble the interstitial spaces on a small scale, in order to create a new porosity of the existing sites, and a new relation between architectural objects (residential or commercial) and the open space connected with them.

Within this second category of open space, one can find abandoned or marginal places, since long time defined by Ignasi de Sola Morales as “terrain vague”, spaces that are waiting for a new architectural guideline, and active spaces, products of urban sprawl, such as car parks, green spaces, backs yards of buildings, etc: “drosscape”, as defined by A.Berger, or “junkspace” by R. Koolhaas. These open spaces are dense and residual, they are the legal requirement that allows the urban sprawl to work, although without a formal result of spatial relationships. They become an interesting resource, but not a concrete structure of the urban fabric.

Both these spaces have a common character linked to the fact that they are interstitial figure, as waste, residues of something else. R. Smithson during the famous promenade in Pessaic, described these sites as the interstitial spaces, comparing them to a mirror: “Just outside the construction site you are in a new land, a parking lot, where second hand cars are sold, that splits the city in two parts: a mirror in which you do not understand on which side it is. The reality of the city looses itself endlessly in the double reflection”. (F. Careri, Walkscape)

As the mirror, they express a formal ambiguity, between inside and outside, between context
an their surfaces, between public and private. At the same time, they express a time ambiguity connected to their inevitable and rapid transformation. These places are living “here and now”, in the unexpected, they express a psychological ambiguity due to disorientation, alienation and alarm, but also to a strong sense of openness and discovery. (G. Teyssot, *Thresholds and Folds*)

These are spaces that seem to be meaningless, unmodeled, empty, because we are not able to recognize them, they are not within our mental maps, because they are someone else’s spaces.

“Loose spaces”, not “entangled”, but with infinite possibilities of use and meaning. Incomplete spaces, varied, unpredictable in time and space, and especially not belonging to the landscape described by the gaze, but crossable.

In fact, from a sociological perspective, “the term interstitial has a precise meaning, the term was used by Karl Marx to describe the trading community, which are beyond the framework of the capitalist economy: barter sales losses, self-sufficient production... The interstitial space is an area of human relations that suggests other trading possibilities than those in force in that system”. (N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*).

Some interesting artistic, radical and participation actions (community garden, park-ing day, etc. . .) are related to these places, that have questioned the figurative and semantic principles of old open spaces, and they bring a new information on the temporality and their use: “(...) at minimum of new actions,”the singular practices “aforementioned, with Increasing frequency found in today's urban enivroment. They reveal the Existence of a world rich in inventive-modes lifestyles, reinvent our daily lives, and reoccupy urban space with new uses. Walking, gardening, recycling, and playing Thousands of actions underlie That We Can Undertake. Walking means clustering Occupying urban world in an appropriate Manner, re-stablished social relationships. Means-ground urban gardening caring for thinking about our society's waste. Recycling means-taking possession of physical and social city in creative and unexpected ways. “(M.Zardini, *A new urban take over, as published in What we can do with the city*, p. 16)

These features seem to recall an architectural antecedent, defined as an architectural-urban invariant: the poché. These spaces may be treated as contemporary urban poché. Of course it is unthinkable to consider this term poché only in its figurative significance, but it should be expanded to an architectural strategy. This architectural device is no longer a spatial and figurative issue, with the meaning given by L. Kahn, R. Venturi and C. Rowe, but it should be considered as a void strategy, with the meaning given by Koolhaas.

In the Lombardy region, especially within the range of the area of northern Milan, it is possible to recognize some urban matrices around a core of “historical” urban fabric, which is compact and porous, made of overlapping courtyard types, arranged along the primary road connections: districts of the 60s and 70s, connected to an image of the modern city; spread residential colonies, defined by a geometric street grid (Urban Fabric Type A). This latter type didn’t produce new types of urban or semi-public open space, but only the fragmentation of all connective open spaces: here the transition from public (street) to private (residential) is immediate, there are no intermediate elements between infrastructure and housing.

Recently, however, with respect to this undifferentiated urban fabric extension, the development of new, more compact buildings, urban cluster was registered, (compares A. Lanzani), which have a different structure and size, often placed at the edge of the city. These clusters have three morphological and dispositive variations, which reflect their temporal evolution from the extensive urban fabric (Type A). The first figure (Urban Fabric Type B) can be described as a residential densification on a secondary road, parallel to the main road, an exclusive space belonging to dwellers. The residential units are arranged on one side or both sides of the road. Here, despite the fact that the transition between public and private have the same characteristics as of type A, the layout of the housing along the road defines a unity in comparison to the surrounding context. Here the road and the adjoining parking lot are not a fragment of the road structure inside the urban fabric, but overall it is an added element to it, which can be eliminated or modified.

A further development (Urban fabric Type C) is represented by a more dimensional and functional extension of the interior infrastructural landscape of type B, which can often become a sort of parking square, around which the houses have their access. The size of this space is such as to define a collective open place. The last figure (Urban fabric Type D) is the one that best correspond to the most recent conformations.

Within their settlement pattern, you can find three recurring spatial elements: the road as an infrastructural connection, parking lots and collective green space, which act as a sort approach sequence to the environment.

We are dealing with a different landscape, which requires a different approach and requires a reversal perspective, these spaces are recognizable and interstitial places, the product of urban sprawl, which cause them to be reconsidered as suitable sites to develop a new principle of urbanty. Spatial resource, in the perspective of new ground project and of new building
reconfiguration, with an appropriate language. For these spaces it will not be possible to adopt the same criteria, the same architectural figures of the traditional city, closed and compact: "where a traditional distinction between public and private, or an usual occupation of the ground, can no longer be adopted, but a “private urbanization". The importance of this public space is not to be more or less extensive, or to have a quantitatively dominant or a symbolic character, but to be related to each other, turning private spaces into collective heritage. Give an urban and public character to buildings and places, without which they would only be private. Urbanize the private, this is this concept. (...) The metropolitan suburbs, paradoxically, the future life of the city, will be made of these spaces, that without the rhetoric of formal representation, become places of interest. This is the task of the designers in the modern urban design: to make these in-between places neither public nor private, ambiguous spaces are now the most significant in the daily social life". (E. de Sola Morales, Cut City).

We must rethink about an architectural project, that involves these interstitial spaces through the design of their edges and surfaces. This does not mean the imposition of a complete, pre-determined design, but rather an implementation of the space through a design that could imply some incompleteness and marks rather than defined structures.

If the spatial component of the project can vary by acquiring these mutability parameters working on the edges, on their size and function, in the same way its surface, its uses and landscapes may vary over time.

The new edges should play through a principle of ambiguity, between private and public, open and enclosed spaces. The property boundary, in fact, in its spatial and material configuration, in the relationship with the adjacent buildings, generates different shapes of interpenetration and continuity, as the articulation of the volumes themselves.

The entrance devices, the shape of the garden spaces and car parking lots are elements of the investigation of the project.

We must think about the edges, their different levels of visibility, their different temporal instability of their material, and their different spatial and functional condition.

The fences are not only an edge but also can become habitable spaces. Starting from the zero degree, you could rethink about some interesting devices, that had built landscape edges in the past, for example the ha-ha, which represents a change in ground level. In the next step, the
fence can represent a real green structure resource for the community (see F.Haeg, *Architecture after the front lawn*). For example, in the Brion Tomb designed by C. Scarpa, the surrounding wall around includes a cavity that serves as a space for vegetation planting. These edges can become a real habitable space, warehouse, garage, room for rent, etc ... The research from L. Kahn up to today’s A. Mateus, represents some good examples in which architecture defines these edges in a complex way. We can mention the neighbourhood of the Aveirá A.Siza, wherein the housing edge is an aqueduct that marks the boundary of the blocks, both on an architectural level as the edge of several patios of the houses, and on a urban scale, as the edge dividing the dense urban fabric from the adjacent open space. In the surfaces of new open collective spaces, the time factor, during daytime and in the long run, can become a more essential component, more than the threshold spaces, for their formal and functional variables. Two projects had identified two opposite and paradigmatic configurations: the first project is Melun-Senart by Oma, which investigates this process through the figure and ground variation, not imposing duties or spaces but precise relationships and contact conditions and overlaps between the islands and international bands. Here time works with the architectural plan figures, with their functional density. On the other hand, in M. Desvigne’s project by Thomson Factory, unlike in R.Koolhaas design, time works in first instance with the matter of the project, the plant material and the surface drainage of the asphalt. The design object is determined by time, by the growth of the green surface and by the inevitable transformation of the place itself. The emphasis is not on the relationship between background and figure, but on the transformation and definition of a different landscape.

**Bibliografia**

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In the past few years, a new generation of housing ensembles has emerged, building a new density and a different sociality. A new principle of urbanity can arise from the interpretation of the shape of these connection spaces, within the residential development, as part of more extensive morphological that determines the quality of the urban landscape, identifying them as a place of change of design strategies and regulations, according to criteria of economic and environmental sustainability.

A crucial issue, which applies to new developments on the outskirts of towns and settlements within the territory of a more widespread, is the identification of a new condition of urbanity.

WHICH URBANITY?

**Urban fabric type A**

**Urban fabric type B**

**Urban fabric type C**

**Urban fabric type D**

![Map of interstitial voids and dead plots](image-url)
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**WHICH URBANITY?**

**Urban fabric type A**
- infrastructure/common parking lot and common garden/garden+house infrastructure

**Urban fabric type B**
- extended edges
- infrastructural space
- temporary parking surface

**Urban fabric type C**
- habitable edges
- parking lot space
- folded surfaces

**Urban fabric type D**
- blurred edges
- parking space